DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 386 827 EA 027 041

AUTHOR Peterson, Kent D.; And Others
TITLE Principals' Skills and Knowledge for Shared Decision Making.
INSTITUTION Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, Madison, WI.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Aug 95
CONTRACT R117Q00005-95
NOTE 9p.
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Collegiality; *Decentralization; Educational Change; Elementary Secondary Education; Governance; *Institutional Mission; Interprofessional Relationship; *Participative Decision Making; *Principals; *School Based Management; Teamwork

ABSTRACT

Many schools across the United States are attempting to implement some form of decentralization and shared decision making. This paper identifies some of the challenges associated with implementing school-based decision making and describes ways in which some schools and their principals have dealt effectively with them. Three particular challenges face principals when implementing school-based decision making: (1) developing a clear, shared educational vision; (2) developing effective decision-making and governance processes; and (3) building well functioning teams. Findings of a study of site-based, shared decision making in 24 schools--the School Restructuring Study (SRS)--elaborates on these three problems. Suggestions for improving the implementation of shared decision making, based on SRS findings, include: increase staff/administrator interaction and dialogue; appoint key members who keep the focus on the school's mission; and participate in systematic training programs. (Contains 10 references.) (LMI)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 386 827

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PRINCIPALS SKILLS AND KNOWLEDGE FOR SHARED DECISION MAKING

Kent D. Peterson, Kubilay Gok, and Valli D. Warren

University of Wisconsin-Madison

August 1995

FINAL DELIVERABLE TO OERI

This paper was prepared at the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools, supported by the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Research and Improvement (Grant No. R117Q00005-95) and by the Wisconsin Center for Education Research, School of Education, University of Wisconsin-Madison. The opinions expressed in this publication are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the supporting agencies.

EA 027041

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

INTRODUCTION

Many schools across the country are attempting to implement some form of decentralization and shared decision making. This is a difficult and complicated reform to implement. In fact, a number of studies point to the fact that SBDM is not working well (see Murphy and Beck, 1995). Some studies do show a connection between SBDM and student learning (Smylie, Lazarus, and Brownlee-Conyers, 1995) and teacher sense of empowerment. In this article we address some of the challenges of implementing SBDM and point to ways some schools are dealing effectively with them.

Often occurring together, site based shared decision making (SBDM) is changing the nature of the principals' work in a number of important ways. SBDM produces a new and complex set of conditions and problems. In turn, these problems require the principal to acquire new or expanded skills and knowledge.

Three particular challenges face principals when implementing SBDM. These involve: (1) the need to help their school articulate a clear educational vision, and (2) the problems and demands associated with shared governance (especially decision making, integrating the flow of plans and ideas, and dealing with conflict), and (3) the challenges of developing effective teamwork. These three problems create new demands on the knowledge base and skills of principals.

In short, for decentralized, shared decision making to be successful school leadership needs, first, to be able to articulate a shared educational vision for the school so that the new governance structures can have some clarity of purpose and direction. Second, schools with SBDM need to have leaders with knowledge and skills in governance and decision making. Third, they need the ability to develop effective working teams.

In this paper we cannot detail all the possible skills or knowledge arenas that SBDM fosters. We will describe some of the kinds of problems that have developed and suggest ways that some schools and principals are dealing with these challenges.

NEW PROBLEMS, NEW SKILLS FOR SBDM

As part of the School Restructuring Study (SRS) conducted by the Center on Organization and Restructuring of Schools (CORS), we have been examining the structures, processes and outcomes of site based shared decision making in 24 schools. These schools, equally divided by level, were selected for the SRS because they were engaged in a number of different restructuring initiatives for two years or more. All were attempting to implement some aspect of decentralized decision making that involved teachers, and sometimes, other members of the school community.

Several things struck us in looking at these schools. First, many were attempting a variety of restructuring efforts with unclear or very diffuse visions of education. Without clear educational visions SBDM processes seem to create additional inefficiencies or even more conflict within schools. Second, many had implemented decision making structures without clear governance processes that specified decision making rules (voting, consensus, etc.), delineated review processes (who can overturn decisions), or laid out formal jurisdictions for councils, committees, and teachers (who decides on what kinds of issues). These problems appeared to foster increased fragmentation of decision making, more conflict (some constructive and some destructive), and staff alienation. Third, many groups did not function well, and few developed shared leadership roles and cohesiveness, attributes of effective teams.

School leaders, primarily principals, but also teachers in a number of these schools had to cope with many problems and demands as they worked in SBDM schools. They faced these three major problems:

(1) the need for a clear educational vision,

(2) the challenge of designing good decision making practices and structures, and

(3) the need to develop effective teams.

In the following discussion we elaborate on these three problems and suggest some skills that seem especially useful to making schools more successful at decision making.

Problems One: Developing a clear, shared educational vision

Few of the SRS schools had a clear and shared mission. In those schools that did have one, the mission helped coordinate and focus the energies of staff during staff development, discussions of reform, and planning. In other schools, lack of a shared mission produced fragmented planning and kept decision making unfocused. In several of the SRS schools, for example it appeared that their missions were developed through the wholesale adoption of a major restructuring organization such as the Coalition for Essential Schools or the Accelerated Schools Program. Few schools had spent the time necessary to develop collaboratively a clear, focused, and inspiring vision for their school.

In many schools the words of the mission were poorly reinforced through their actions. A few of the schools used creative ways of communicating and reinforcing the mission through a variety of symbolic activities, finding times to meet and discuss the mission, and regularly making decisions based on the mission. A few schools had multiple ways to communicate the mission of the school to stakeholders through mission statements and slogans, displays of student and teacher successes related to the mission posted in the school, and the communication of the vision by articulate leaders.

We observed activities in several schools that seemed to bring focus to the school mission.

In these more successful schools:

** Principals and other school leaders talked enthusiastically and engagingly about what the school stands for in language that all stakeholders could understand.*

** Faculty study groups, retreats, and planning time aided in the development and reinforcement of the school mission.*

** Staff and administrators regularly talked about the core beliefs and values of the school to staff and parents.*

** Principals and other leaders in several schools used multiple approaches to developing, communicating and applying an educational vision. Sometimes the vision for the school was part of a mission statement, statement of beliefs, or slogan--but leaders were able to tell people what they stand for.*

Problem Two: Developing effective decision making and governance processes

Few schools had developed well organized governance, decision making and planning processes. Few had clear structures, well defined jurisdictions, and well-functioning decision making processes. Systematic program review and planning activities were often not in place (See Peterson and Warren, 1994). This meant that some groups within the schools spent considerable time and effort developing plans, only to have the school council, for example, overturn them. In other schools there were highly active committee structures and groups who planned and implemented ideas, without going through councils.

Advanced knowledge of shared decision making, planning and team building were not common. Many schools made good decisions, but often very inefficiently. In one school with a long history of collaboration and dialogue, a clear decision process and a charismatic principal, the governance process worked well. Effective techniques used in many organizations (Nominal Group Process, Delphi Technique, and systematic problem solving) that could have improved the decision making process were rare.

Some schools got bogged down in determining how to decide. They spent a lot of time deciding how to decide then had little time to decide on anything else. Other schools brought in councils, committees, and task forces, but then didn't know how to coordinate their work and decisions. Often people on the teams didn't know who finally decided, who had final authority.

In the more successful schools:

** Principals and staff developed ways for decisions to flow from discussion, to decision, to dissemination. They specified who discusses, who describes and who has final say.*

** Leaders developed a systematic process for planning problem solving, and decision making that was focused on school improvement. Otherwise, councils and committees tended to focus on management and administrivia rather than instructional improvement.*

** Staff and administrators seemed to have a wide repertoire of planning, decision making and problem solving tools. Some used brainstorming, force field analysis, group problem solving, inquiry methods, or other approaches to decide on new programs or to design strategies for the school. It seemed less important exactly what process they used, but rather that they had a process to move them from discussion to decision to implementation in a smooth fashion.*

Problem Three: Building well functioning teams

In addition to effective decision making and governance processes, more successful schools had groups and councils that became cohesive and collaborative teams. In a number of schools, groups of teachers had developed into very effective small teams who could plan and implement programs. But, it appears this often occurred because team members were personally skilled at working together, for little training occurred to prepare them to work as teams. New members often lacked these skills and there were few opportunities in some schools to learn them.

In a number of schools, groups of staff worked extremely well together, often due to excellent interpersonal skills and in some cases due to prior opportunities to work together in a variety of activities. Infrequently, did we find staff or administrators receive systematic training in teamwork skills, planning or inquiry.

Many teams lacked skills in dealing with disagreement and conflict. In some instances it was clear that when teams ran into problems, they often did not know what to do about them. In some cases conflict or dysfunctional team members hampered collaborative efforts.

In even the most effective teams, the knowledge base appeared to be intuitive rather than based on research. Training and development in this area could have substantially improved the effectiveness of group functioning.

In more successful schools:

** Leaders as well as team members had good skills in working together, running meetings, developing agendas, problem solving, maintaining team focus, time-use and other*

meeting skills. Some knew a little about stages of team development, effective team roles, and ways to foster cohesiveness.

** Councils and committees built cohesive teams by using retreats to develop plans, attending conferences on restructuring as a team, or collaborating on inservice programs for the district or region.*

** Staff and principals attended district level training where there were systematic and continuous opportunities to develop skills in team decision making; and some schools had training provided by restructuring or reform groups. These efforts seemed to make a difference in the effectiveness of the teams.*

NEW APPROACHES TO TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

School leaders with SBDM schools face increasingly complex, demanding and time-consuming work. Finding the time and energy to deal with defining a clear educational mission, developing effective decision making and governance processes, and building successful teams is not easy. A number of different approaches could be used to maximize the availability of training and development opportunities.

Here are a few suggestions and examples from the SRS schools:

1. Many of the schools dealt with these three problems by increasing the time and attention staff and administrators spent together talking about their vision for the school and the ways they wanted to work together. Time together in meaningful dialogue helped.

In addition, faculty study groups, extended work on curricula, and a conscious effort to analyze the quality of team decision making all helped build skills and focus energies.

2. In several schools the mission was collaboratively written, but a few people were known as "keepers of the dream," key members of the culture who forever encouraged attention to what they were trying to do. They regularly spoke of the core elements of the mission, brought it up in discussions, and modeled its central values.

3. Several of the successful schools took advantage of systematic training programs that gave them concrete skills and approaches to decision making, problem solving, and teamwork. Some attended workshops or gained practice in teamwork. It appeared, though, that these worked best when there was a lot of reflective dialogue back at the school--times when teachers and administrators could think deeply and talk about what they valued and where they were going.

Overall, a mix of formal opportunities to learn combined with highly collaborative and continuously reflective practice at school produced some superbly functioning shared decision making teams.

Suggested Readings and References

Conley, S., & Bacharach, S. (1990). From school site-management to participatory school-site management. Phi Delta Kappan, 72, 68-75.

Evans, James R. (1991). *Creative thinking in the decision and management sciences*. Cincinnati: Southwestern Publishing Company.

Fullan, M. G. (1993). *Change forces: Probing the depths of educational reform*. Philadelphia: Falmer.

Katzenbach, J. R., & Smith, D. K. (1993). *The wisdom of teams: Creating the high performance organization*. Boston, MA: Harvard Business School Press.

Louis, K. S., & Miles, M. B. (1990). *Improving the urban high school: What works and why*. New York: Teachers College Press.

Murphy, J., & Beck, L. G.(1995). *School-based management as school reform: Taking stock*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Corwin.

Peterson, K. D., & Warren, V. D. (1994). Changes in school governance and principals' roles: Changing jurisdictions, new power dynamics, and conflict in restructured schools. In J. Murphy & K. S. Louis, (Eds.), *Reshaping the principalship: Insights from transformational reform efforts*. Thousand Oaks, CA.: Corwin Press,Inc.

Scholtes, P. R., & Associates. (1988). *The Team Handbook*. Madison, WI: Joiner Associates.

Smylie, M.A., Lazarus, V., & Brownlee-Conyers, J. (1995). *Instructional outcomes of school-based participative decision making*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco.

Weiss, C. H., et. al. (1992). Trouble in paradise: Teacher conflicts in shared decision making. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *28*(3), 350-367.